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An administrator's vision for elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

A successful educational leader must have a passion for education and be an advocate for children. A well-rounded leader exhibits traits from all six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL). Having clear high expectations and setting clearly understood goals will help lead a school in the right direction. Clear expectations and goals will ensure that the learning climate and culture in the building will be supportive, caring, safe, and positive. Students and their families will feel a belonging and want to stay. Collaboration will be a priority for everyone. Working together as a team will create a positive learning atmosphere where all can achieve their highest potential. The purpose of an educational leader is to focus on student learning and student achievement.

AN ADMINISTRATOR'S VISION FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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One must possess many important qualities to become a successful and effective educational leader. I believe many qualities of a successful leader are innate. The experiences we have had throughout life shape us and mold us into the person we are today. Therefore, the development of your personality and leadership skills are most likely present by the time you become an administrator (Snowden & Gorton, 2002). First, I must be an advocate for children. Giroux said in 1988 in *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Critical Pedagogy in the Modern Age* that he believes education must ultimately work towards the empowerment of the student. I will promote success by building relationships with others. John Maxwell (2001) stated in *The Right to Lead* that to be a leader who others want to follow, you need to build positive relationships. Maxwell also added:

Leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less. That means it is by nature relational. Today's generation of leaders seem particularly aware of this because title and position mean so little to them. They know intuitively that people go along with people they get along with (p.8).

Therefore, possessing good interpersonal and collaborative skills and humanistic-encouraging traits are very important. Codeiro and Cunningham acknowledged Covey's similar belief in the importance of these skills. He believes that "in order to be a successful administrator, you must learn to listen within the frame of reference of others" (Cunningham & Codeiro, 2000, p.176).

People want a leader who promotes a safe and positive learning environment. A leader needs to be a positive role model at all times. I must show enthusiasm, give encouragement, and possess good communication skills. A high priority must be given to effective communication skills if any administrator wants to be successful (Snowden & Gorton, 2002). I need to be self-disciplined, and set clear expectations and goals. As stated by Maxwell (2002), relying on self-discipline is a key factor in becoming a better leader.

Leadership is often easy during good times. It's when everything seems to be against you – when you're out of energy, and you don't want to lead – that you earn your place as a leader. During every season of life, leaders face crucial moments when they must choose between gearing up or giving up. To make it through those times, rely on the rock of discipline, not the shifting sand of emotion (p.8).

My values and beliefs will shine through in my actions and words. All stakeholders will see my commitment to education, my passion for learning, and my advocacy for children. I will prove my good leadership skills through decisions that are made in the best interest of the students in my school. I will be sure to assess all aspects of the situation before making the best possible decision. Students will always be put first. Changes will be made to enhance teaching and student learning. I am one who sees the big picture and makes decisions accordingly. I will look at what's best for individuals, and also what is best for the

entire organization. Some of the best leaders lead by example. People tend to gravitate toward individuals who lead in this manner. As stated by Maxwell (2002), "Leaders provide for their people what people cannot provide for themselves" (p.96).

A successful administrator must utilize characteristics from all of the six Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLLCS).

Visionary Leadership

When people in an organization can agree on the purposes, values, beliefs, and goals that guide their behavior, a vision evolves. I feel that Visionary Leadership provides the foundation for the Iowa Standards for School Leaders. I see Visionary Leadership represented by an inspiring school leader who effectively and successfully involves staff, students, parents, and community members in the development, facilitation, and implementation of the school's vision and goals. These stake holders will be challenged to meet these goals. The vision should inspire others to follow the leader and mold the way people see the world (Lacayo, 1996). The school's vision must be directly linked with student achievement and measurable goals. It is important that goals give the school a focused purpose. As an administrator, I will look at our goals for the future to make sure the school is headed in the right direction.

I will establish positive, open, and on-going communication with staff, parents, and community members. As a community of learners, we will devise a

plan that will guide us in the right direction. Success will be promoted when students and staff members are actively involved in developing the vision. After all, they are the ones who carry it out in the classroom. Staff members, parents, and community members will feel a willingness to help make changes when they are encouraged and feel like they are a part of the big picture.

It is important that a visionary leader evaluates, reflects, and revises the vision, goals, and plans on an on-going basis with the involvement of all stakeholders. Reflecting and evaluating the plans currently in place will be important in making successful changes for student achievement. Administrators need to place priority on the assessment of effective decision-making in order for the change or task to happen (Snowden & Gorton, 2002). As an educational leader, I need to communicate the school's vision by revisiting it through many activities, assemblies, discussions, and meetings. Our school's vision will be the driving force behind all that we do. It is imperative to celebrate success as well as address barriers and see where improvements can be made.

Instructional Leadership

The purpose for instruction in school is to provide students with the knowledge they need to take on tasks that lie ahead. Today, administrators are becoming instructional leaders more than ever before. More emphasis has been placed on administrators as instructional leaders.

An instructional leader is one who provides instruction that meets the students' needs and encourages and models life-long learning. Encouraging and modeling life-long learning will be evident as I collaborate with the staff and students. The most important role of an instructional leader is to be actively involved with staff and students in the learning environment. I will make myself visible by visiting classrooms, the playground, lunchroom, and hallways. I want the students to know that I care about them. The students need to know that the staff cares about them too. I want the staff to get to know and understand their students so effective learning can take place. We must understand the multiple learning styles of our students. The instructional leader's high expectations, active involvement, and focus on student learning will be very evident.

I feel it is important to build teams. Collaboration is a key factor in being a successful administrator. In 1988 Geber stated in *Training* that if people are willing to come up with options, then teamwork and collaboration will create better decisions. Together, we can set goals and examine the curriculum and the district objectives. The more collaborative opportunities we provide as an administrator, the more positive and effective the learning environment will be.

Encouragement, support, and genuine care are essential for a successful educational leader. According to the Kellogg Leadership Studies Project (1997), researchers came up with the following purposes of leadership:

- to create a supportive environment where people can thrive, grow, and live in peace with one another
- to promote harmony with nature and thereby provide sustain ability for future generations
- to create communities of reciprocal care and shared responsibility, where every person matters and each person's welfare and dignity is respected and supported (p.202).

Other important aspects that create a safe environment and encourage the performance of staff members include being honest, treating others with respect, developing trust, being sensitive to needs of staff, and having a positive attitude (Knoll, 1987). Other ways I will encourage and support my staff is through positive reinforcement, small treats of appreciation, recognition at meetings or in the school newsletter, and giving them the opportunity to share success stories at staff meetings. Cooper (2000) believes that recognizing others and their accomplishments is essential in getting others to follow and support the leader. I will encourage the staff to be actively involved in the decision-making process. I see my job as a facilitator supporting staff members and making sure the decisions are being made and implemented. Students, staff, and parents feel

valued when they are included in making important decisions toward student learning. Encouragement and support make people feel important and confident in their job performance.

As an educational leader, I feel it is essential to help teachers develop and reach their greatest potential. I want to provide teachers and other staff members with on-going professional development to continuously improve themselves as educators. I must give them as many opportunities as possible for continued learning. These learning opportunities should allow teachers time to work together and time to reflect together (O'Neil, 1995).

Evaluation and assessment are also important elements for an instructional leader to understand and utilize. Student learning must be assessed in a variety of ways. When problems arise that impact student achievement, they must be identified and addressed. Teachers should be involved in the development of the assessments to be used when measuring student learning because they will be the ones that ultimately carry out the instruction in the classroom. The curriculum and instruction should also be based on research and best practices of teachers. Not only are students being evaluated, but teachers as well. Staff members will know their expectations and responsibilities. I will demonstrate instructional leadership by observing teachers and providing immediate and on-going feedback.

Organizational Leadership

A successful educational leader should promote success by making sure there is a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. The environment must be conducive to learning. To be a successful leader, I must demonstrate effective communication and problem solving skills. The administrator's position is key when it comes to communicating with people related to the organization (Snowden & Gorton). All stakeholders should be involved in the decision-making process. If problems arise, they will be identified and resolved quickly. I will make appropriate accommodations depending on the situation.

According to Sergiovanni (1994) we must remember people and organizations are at different stages developmentally. Each developmental stage has different needs and priorities (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, & Jefferies, 2000). Changes will be made to enhance teaching and student learning. Students' needs are always the most important. Students' needs also require confidentiality. Confidentiality means that school records should be kept private by personnel. I feel strongly that decisions should be made that are best for the child and the child's situation. Only the people directly involved with the child should be involved in the decision-making process. As an administrator, I must make sure those involved understand the purpose of their involvement (Snowden & Gorton, 2002).

The school's financial resources must be managed responsibly so that goals can be attained. Safety for students and staff must be constantly monitored and must involve all stakeholders. Any safety issues must be reported and dealt with in a timely manner.

Collaborative Leadership

Administrators play an important role in collaborative leadership. As a collaborative leader, I will model collaboration by placing an emphasis on working together. The outcome will be effective teaching and learning. I will act as a facilitator in staff, committee, and community meetings to discuss curriculum and instruction. This shared leadership empowers others and ultimately gives them more power and increases their professionalism (Maeroff, 1989). Maxwell (2001) states:

Give your power away. One of the ironies of leadership is that you become a better leader by sharing whatever power you have, not by saving it all for yourself. You're meant to be a river, not a reservoir. If you use your power to empower others, your leadership will extend far beyond your grasp. (p.9)

Shared leadership also allows staff members to be creative. An administrator must be actively seen observing and working together with teachers. Sergiovanni & Moore (1989) in *Schooling for Tomorrow: Directing Reform to Issues that Count* indicated that influential principals who possess unique skills and

knowledge will help teachers accomplish their goals. A successful administrator also uses influence to help teachers reach their goals (Snowden & Gorton, 2002). I believe more effective teaching and learning takes place when collaboration is successful in a building. Research also shows that staff morale can improve by valuing others' opinions through collaboration (Snowden & Gorton). Teachers must be given a chance to share their knowledge, skills, and expertise.

As a collaborative leader, I understand the time that must be provided for teachers to collaborate effectively. It will be important for me to align teachers' schedules so they have time to work together, plan, examine the curriculum, make necessary changes, and discuss best practices. I will also be involved with my teachers by observing, evaluating, and working together with them on curriculum and scheduling. I believe principals that collaborate effectively are those actively involved in these processes with their teachers.

Another important aspect of organizational leadership is helping others feel a shared sense of ownership. The school will act entrepreneurially and keep up with emerging trends by forming alliances with businesses in the community. I will be actively involved in the community, using them as a resource. I will collaborate with the families and other members of the community to promote success for all students and their learning needs. Community and school programs will be integrated and community resources will be used to help the school achieve their vision and solve problems well. As a principal, I cannot

work in isolation. If I want to make significant changes, I must utilize teamwork skills.

Ethical Leadership

Educational leaders must demonstrate ethical leadership in every day activities and in school policies. Ethical leadership means I will lead by setting examples based upon my attitudes, beliefs, ideas, and values. Covey (1997) stated, "We must center our lives on timeless, unchanging principles" (p.83). I must serve as a role model to those around me. A role model not only communicates ideas, beliefs, and values in words, but also in actions. "Great leaders embody the message they advocate, they teach, not just through words, but through actions" (Gardner, 1995). I will model my beliefs, ideas, and values to inspire others to do their best. It is very important to build trust, develop mutual respect for one another, be consistent, and treat people fairly. People want to trust their leader, and communication is an essential part of building two-way trust with others. "There is mutual trust, respect, and loyalty that is grounded in shared ethics and values" (Covey, 1997, p.85). He also believes that people follow others because they believe in them and their accomplishments (1997). Building relationships with others and having a positive attitude will help promote continuous improvement and success throughout the building.

Staff and students must feel like they belong and are treated with fairness. Therefore, staff members need to treat students with dignity and respect. I will encourage the staff to celebrate students' differences.

Political Leadership

Political leadership is examining and understanding the big picture of the school and its surrounding environment. As an educational leader, I must be aware and knowledgeable of current trends and issues in the community. I must be effective in marketing the needs of my school within the district. I will utilize assistance and help that may be available from the school board or district to help better my school.

Continuous communication with community groups and families is crucial for the success of all students and their learning environment. Developing relationships with community members and students' families is very important. When building these relationships, student needs should always be a priority. Academic and social needs will be addressed when these partnerships take place. A wealth of knowledge and information can come from parents regarding their child. We need to key into that as educators and establish good rapport with them. "Parents also bring fresh perspectives to the school about priorities for education and more specific causes of students' responses to instruction" (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2001, p.100). A political leader involves all

stakeholders in the decision-making process. Not only will I be a role model at school, but in the community as well.

Communication with staff is extremely crucial and is one of the most important factors in developing positive relationships with them. Open and honest communication allows for the development of a two way trust. I will speak with staff members on an informal basis as well as having monthly staff meetings. I will make sure everyone is involved in the decision making by sharing all necessary information with the staff. I believe everyone's voice should be heard and that their opinion matters. In this environment, people are then able to think creatively, take risks, and explore other areas to benefit the child.

As a leader, I will abide by, follow, and endorse all school policies, regulations, and laws enacted by the government. By doing so, people will know that all aspects of the situation will be examined, and the decisions being made will be fair and consistent.

Conclusion

A successful educational leader must have a passion for education and be an advocate for children. A well-rounded leader exhibits traits from all six Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL). I want to make a difference by being a leader. I will strive for success by building relationships with others using good communication and interpersonal skills. People will develop trust in me because I

will lead by example, acting as a role model for those around me. Having clear high expectations and setting clearly understood goals will help lead our school in the right direction. Clear expectations and goals will ensure that the learning climate and culture in the building will be supportive, caring, safe, and positive. Students and their families will feel a belonging and want to stay. Collaboration will be a priority for everyone. Working together as a team will create a positive learning atmosphere where all can achieve to their highest potential. The purpose of an educational leader is to focus on student learning and student achievement.

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